

First Place Short-Short Fiction Prize (Tie)
~ In the 24th Consecutive NMW Awards ~

Louise Aronson

After

At the Rock Creek State Veterans Home where some people come and go but most come and stay, Rodney Brown, a.k.a. A-Rod, nudges the bible off the edge of his bed. It hits the floor with a slam and across the room. K.C.'s eyes open, scan, then roll up, and he says, "Shit, man, not again. What the fuck time is it anyway?"

Rodney ignores K.C. and turns on his call light by slapping his left arm against the pressure-sensitive pad beside him on the bed. And then he waits, something he's getting good at, not that he has much choice, though at least he's better off than Danny Stockton who took one in the head or Pablo Villela who lives three floors up on the ward where you don't have to do anything for yourself, not even eat, not even breath.

He listens for footsteps. Sometimes he can tell which girl is coming by the way her shoes touch down on the linoleum: Zeny does a tap-shush, Carina makes a squeak-sigh-squeak, and big Grace—full of self-importance—sounds as solid and steady as a man. With Rita, his favorite, there's only the nearly inaudible brush of one nylon thigh against the other.

Unfortunately, Rodney's nose also works well—too well—and now it's telling him that someone somewhere not far enough away is crapping himself. He hopes it's K.C. and not him since the hall is completely quiet, meaning it's still the night shift, the staff sacked out in an empty bed or in the med room or wherever the hell else they hid when you needed them most.

Hallway light bleeds through gaps above and beneath the door then diffuses across the room. It's just bright enough that Rodney can see K.C.'s open eyes trained on that place where—for a few months—there'd been a *before* photo, K.C.'s arms around the woman who'd visited daily until the afternoon she didn't pull up the orange vinyl chair but stood to one side of K.C.'s bed and announced that she loved him but she was too young for all this, that she needed a life, a real life like the one she'd always dreamed of, and that she wished him well, and he'd always be in her prayers, and finally, that she really, really hoped they could be friends forever, no matter what.

Footsteps sound in the corridor. Rodney listens then smiles. It's Grace for sure, and he's about to advise K.C. to turn his head and catch some of the eye candy as big Gracey bows and reaches for the bible on the floor when out of the blue he gets a pain in his right foot, a sudden explosive burn like a lighter held to his toes.

"Oh fuck!" he yells, though the pain fades as quickly as it appeared, replaced by a smolder with a throbbing behind it.

K.C. asks if he's OK, but Rodney doesn't answer. He's concentrating, relaxing into a hurt so familiar it's almost as if he can smell the strange German pizza a nurse named Eva used to sneak him at the hospital in Landstuhl in those last, best days before they transferred him here. "You're lucky," she had whispered, placing tiny rounds of sausage and melted cheese on his tongue and jerking her chin at the other beds. Her breath, warm and sharp from cigarettes and coffee, traveled into his ear and down his torso, landing between his hips where it blossomed into a problem he could no longer solve.

Rodney blinks and drags his left wrist across his eyes; the pain's better now, no more than an ember. He looks down the bed at the bump that is his feet, a short, sloped ridge that might be anyone's feet or even part of the bed itself, and there's no movement down there, but that doesn't matter because this time he knows he felt something.

"Grace," he shouts, wondering where she went. He slaps the call light again, slaps it and slaps it. "Yo," he says to K.C. "Help me, man," but K.C. only grunts and pulls his pillow over his head.

Twenty minutes later—long enough for Rodney to be certain it's all coming back: the toe, the foot, the leg, everything—he hears the solid, steady steps again.

"Hey," he calls, "Gracey, please," and the door opens.

The person in the doorway isn't Grace or any of the other girls but a guy Rodney's never seen before, a guy who would have been a total waste of his time earlier, since he would never, ever, watch some Joe bend no matter how hard up he was. In fact, he decides, he won't even mention the fallen bible to the guy, he'll just call again later, hoping for Zeny with her small, soft fingers or Rita with her high-riding ass. But the guy can help him with something more important than a quickie thrill, more important—at least for this one moment—than even the good book itself, and so he says, "My right foot, man! I feel it!"

The aide nods and pulls back the covers, and together they stare at the white space on the sheet next to Rodney's left leg. And Rodney closes his eyes and waves the aide away.

Every morning he somehow forgets. Every morning he wakes up and recognizes the hospital bed and the colorless walls he shares with K.C., and he remembers he's damaged but he forgets precisely how or why, and for a while—seconds at least, but sometimes much, much longer—he imagines that it's not really so bad, that what's left of him was worth saving. But then he remembers, and the remembering changes everything.